

Child Fatality Summary

Child's Name: Madeline Soto

County: Osceola

Date of Birth: 02/22/2011

Date of Death: 03/01/2024

Report Number: 2024-078686

Family Composition Chart

Name	Age at Time of the Incident	Relationship with Deceased Child
Madeline Soto	13 years old	Child Victim
Jennifer Soto	36 years old	Mother
Stephan Sterns	37 years old	Paramour

Circumstances Surrounding Death

On March 1, 2024, a report was received indicating that this 13-year-old child, who had been reported missing on February 26, 2024, was found deceased on March 1, 2024.

Per the initial Affidavit for Arrest Warrant:

On February 26, 2024, Madeline's mother reported her missing at approximately 8:00 p.m. She advised that Madeline's stepfather Stephan Sterns (who is actually the mother's paramour, and not her spouse), had picked Madeline up from home and dropped her off at Hunter's Creek Middle School that morning. However, when the mother then went to pick her up from school at dismissal time, she learned that Madeline had never showed to school.

An interview was conducted with Stephan Sterns, who advised he picked Madeline up and dropped her off in front of Peace United Methodist Pre-School, which was down the street from her own school, at 8:40 a.m. Hunter's Creek Middle School begins class at 9:30 a.m. A License Plate Reader captured Stephan's vehicle driving away from the school at 8:10 a.m. During the interview, Stephan provided consent to search his phone; however, he stated that he had accidentally performed a factory reset on his phone on February 26, 2024, the same day that Madeline went missing.

After an extensive canvass of the area and interviews with Madeline's family and friends, it was determined to be unusual for Madeline to be dropped off down the street from the school and to not stay in communication with others.

Upon reviewing the contents of Stephan's phone, several images and videos were located which depicted Madeline with her breasts and genitals as focal points of the pictures/videos. There were also pictures and videos depicting Madeline being the

victim of sexual battery(ies). These files constituted probable cause to believe Stephan was in possession of material depicting the sexual performance of a child.

Upon further review of these pictures and videos, several different articles of bedding and clothing were observed, to include patterned underwear, shirts, blankets, and sheets. Simultaneously, detectives of the Orange County Sheriff's Office were executing a search warrant at Stephan's home address, which is also where Madeline and her mother reside. The detectives searching the residence were contacted and confirmed they found the same distinctive clothing both in Stephan's room and in Madeline's room. Based on the totality of the circumstances, there was probable cause to believe Stephan committed a sexual battery (familial/custodial authority) against Madeline.

On February 28, 2024, Stephan Sterns was arrested and charged with Sexual Battery (Familial/Custodial Authority) and Possession of Materials Depicting Sexual Performance by a Child.

On March 1, 2024, the Kissimmee Police Department located Madeline's body in Kissimmee, in the area of 5670 Hickory Tree Road. Her official date and time of death was assigned as March 1, 2024, at 4:39 p.m.

District 9 Medical Examiner Jesse C. Giles, M.D., completed Madeline's autopsy on March 2, 2024. ME# 24-000403.

Cause of Death: Strangulation

Manner of Death: Homicide

Autopsy Findings

- I. Fracture of right hyoid bone with local soft tissue hemorrhage
- II. Right temporal scalp superficial abrasion and contusion
- III. Subacute and remote anal blunt trauma
- IV. No detected significant pre-existing medical disease
- V. Moderate but advancing decomposition, including postmortem predation and fly larvae activity

Toxicologic and Laboratory Analyses:

- I. No blood, urine, or ocular fluid available for routine toxicology testing
- II. Low chest fluid and bile ethanol levels found
- III. Caffeine and metabolite detected in chest fluid and brain
- IV. No drugs otherwise found in chest fluid, gastric contents, or brain

Conclusion: In consideration of the circumstances surrounding the death, and after examination of the body and review of toxicologic analyses, it is my opinion that the death of Madeline Soto, a 13-year-old white female, is the result of strangulation.

On March 13, 2024, 60 additional charges were filed against Stephan Sterns:

- Eight counts of Sexual Battery on a Child Under 12;
- Five counts of Sexual Battery with a Child 12-18;
- Seven Counts of Lewd and Lascivious Molestation; and
- 40 Counts of Unlawful Possession of Materials Depicting Sexual Performance by a Child, 10 or More Images.

On April 24, 2024, Stephan Sterns was additionally charged with First Degree Murder.

The trial for the multiple charges related to sexual battery, molestation and possession of materials related to sexual performance by a child is scheduled for July 2025, while the trial regarding Madeline's homicide is scheduled for September 2025.

On May 27, 2025, the Department of Children and Families' investigation was closed with:

- Verified Findings of Death, Asphyxiation, Physical Injury, Sexual Abuse-Sexual Battery, Sexual Abuse-Sexual Molestation and Inadequate Supervision as to Madeline, with Stephan Sterns as the caregiver responsible.

Other Children in the Family:

There are no other children in the care of Stephan Sterns or Madeline's mother. Grief counseling information was provided to the mother.

Summary of Current Agency Involvement with Family

The family did not have any open services.

Summary of Prior Agency Involvement with Family

The family does not have any prior abuse report history.



Central Region Child Fatality Prevention Specialist
Kirby Morgan

5/29/25
Date



Central Region Director of Child Protection
Stephanie Weis

5/29/25
Date

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